

THE COST OF DELAY

**Why Albania should submit an application
for EU membership in autumn 2008¹**

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Executive Summary

In the wake of the recent decision on Kosovo independence the borders of Europeanisation in the Balkans are going to be redrawn in 2008. It is probable that by 2009 Croatia will prepare to become the European Union's (EU) next full member; Montenegro, Macedonia and (perhaps) Serbia will be involved in EU membership talks. And the two EU protectorates, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, could be left behind in a category on their own. The risk is real that Albania will find itself among this diminishing group of countries that do not advance further, viewed as societies that like to dream of Europe but lack the courage and determination to act on their own rhetoric.

This paper argues that it is high time for Albania and its political leaders to wake up to the danger of Albania being left behind. The Albanian political class needs to stop saying to itself that it wants to join the EU and do the most basic, very first, logical step: to announce its intention to other Europeans and EU institutions. For this, Albanian leaders need to set an ambitious goal, build a domestic consensus based on actions and not abstract goals and find a way to work together for Albania to submit an application and obtain candidate status in the EU.

Since the collapse of the Albanian state in 1997 the goal of EU accession has been a driving force for reforms in the country. And yet in recent years – and well before the Albanian car has even reached the starting line in this long race - the motor has already begun to stutter. Albania signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2006, 13 years after Bulgaria signed its Europe Agreement. While this was shortly celebrated, momentum was lost after this signature. Everybody is “for Europe” and nobody is required to work hard to bring this beautiful dream down to earth.

The EU, on the other hand, has come to view Albania as a compliant student. It is neither a pupil winning any prizes nor one to cause any serious trouble. Albanian support for EU policies in the region, such as the Kosovo issue, is taken for granted. It is the most difficult pupil in class that makes EU officials worry which additional carrots to offer. It is Serbia, where almost half the population votes for parties opposed to EU integration, and not Albania with its almost total consensus on the EU goal, that has recently been promised a clear and fast road to official EU candidate status. Meanwhile Albania continues to attract little attention from European policy makers, from European business or from the European press.

Other countries in the region have been more outspoken than Albania. In April 2008, just after the signing of a conditional SAA, the Serbian President Boris Tadic, told a press conference in Luxemburg that Serbia aims “to become an official candidate by the end of the year.” The Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, Gordana Djurovic, told her colleagues from the other Balkan countries at an ESI event in Paris on 17 April that Montenegro would also soon (and certainly in 2008) submit its application for membership. Turkey has continued to push its case, as has Croatia, with great success since 2002.

There will never be a moment when the EU will *invite* countries to submit an application for membership. Bulgaria, and Romania and even Spain, Austria and Greece were actively discouraged by the EU to do so. If the political elite wait for this moment it may well never come and Albania might miss again the train for Brussels. Following a series of agreements on judicial and electoral reform between the major political forces in recent months, Albania received an invitation to join NATO in April this year. This is the time and the year to take the next step.

1. Introduction

The slogan of student protesters that brought down the communist regime in Albania in 1991 was: “We want Albania to be like Europe”. 17 years after the fall of the regime, 92.5 percent of the population still agrees with this.² In a paid advertisement section on Albania in the International Herald Tribune that appeared in spring 2007, it was also noted in the very first line that “the process of EU integration was Albania’s number one priority”.

There is only one problem with this oft repeated announcement. The most basic step for Albania to join the EU, submitting an application to the EU, has not been taken. Without such a step, even repeated announcements lack credibility.

It is true that the goal of EU integration is one of the few issues on which even deeply divided Albanian political parties can agree. Since the collapse of the Albanian state in 1997 the goal of EU accession has also been a driving force for reforms in the country. And yet in recent years – and well before the Albanian car has even reached the starting line in this long race towards full EU membership - the motor has begun to stutter. Albania signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2006, 13 years (!) after Bulgaria signed its Europe Agreement. While this was shortly celebrated, momentum was lost after this signature. Since then, “Europe” has again become a word to be evoked in campaign speeches. Everybody is “for Europe” and nobody is required to work hard to bring this beautiful dream down to earth. To move from nice phrases to hard parliamentary work is left for later.

The EU, on the other hand, has been content with this situation. It has come to view Albania as a compliant student, neither the best in its Balkan class nor the worst. In the context of Balkan politics Albanian stability and support for EU policies in the region can be taken for granted. There is no European concern about ethnic conflicts or border definition in the case of Albania, as there has long been for most of the neighboring countries. There is no party in Albania similar to the Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj in Serbia that keeps EU diplomats awake.

It is the other countries of the region that have attracted the EU’s attention: Croatia, the star pupil on the road to EU accession; Turkey, a large and controversial applicant, nonetheless making steady progress towards the EU since 1999; Serbia, a deeply divided society with an unreformed intelligence sector and the commitment by influential parts of its elite to directly *oppose* EU interests in Kosovo. It is the most difficult pupil in class that makes EU officials worry most which additional carrots could be offered. And therefore it is Serbia, where almost half the population repeatedly votes for parties opposed to EU integration, and

² Albanian Institute for International Studies, Albania and European Union: Perceptions and Realities 2006, pg. 7. Available from: http://www.aiis-albania.org/Perceptions_Realities_2006.pdf.

not Albania with its almost total consensus on the EU goal, that has received most promises of a clear road to EU candidate status soon.

This behavior by European officials is not irrational: a democratic and stable Serbia does matter. What is striking, however, is that Albanian leaders have remained content to play the role of the undemanding pupil. One high-level EU official recently told us in Brussels that Albania need not apply for membership now since it is “more stable than Serbia”: while Serbia might need a discount, Albania need not travel on a “half price ticket.”³ The implication of such statements is clear: those who aggressively press their case receive a discount. Those who do not, don’t even get in the train on a full price ticket.

The result of this is obvious: Albania continues to attract little attention from European policy makers, from European business or from the European press. This is, of course, far preferable to the terrible headlines the country produced in the mid 1990s. It is, however, also causing problems. Albania’s international image is frozen in the past. Who can believe paid-advertisements in international papers that Albania is planning to inhabit a room in the EU house in the foreseeable future when the Albanian political class acts like the suitor afraid of even knocking at the door and introducing himself?

Albanian society has fortunately continued to evolve. The Albania of today is not the Albania of 1997 or even 2000. Tirana today is not Tirana in 2000. And even Albanian politics and the political elite today is not what it was only very recently. Following a series of agreements on judicial and electoral reform between the major political forces in recent months, where political leaders put the national interest above partisan battles.

Albania received an invitation to join NATO in April 2008. This is important. However, the assumption in Brussels is that there is no need now for a similar recognition on the part of the EU. Other countries in the region have certainly shown more ambition. In April 2008, just after the signing of a conditional SAA, the Serbian President Boris Tadic told a press conference in Luxemburg that Serbia aims “to become an official candidate by the end of the year.”⁴ The Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro, Gordana Djurovic told her colleagues from the other Balkan countries at an ESI event in Paris on 17 April that Montenegro would also soon (and certainly in 2008) submit its application for membership.⁵ Turkey has continued to push its case as well, as has Croatia, with great success since 2002. The EU accession process has never been for the timid.

There is another reason why Albanian political elites need to rethink their current timidity. In the wake of the recent decision on Kosovo independence there is a new dynamic in the Balkans. New lines are being drawn, new rankings of the Europeanisation of the

³ Agenda interview in Brussels, European Council, February 2008,

⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL2952262420080429>

⁵ ESI - The Adriatic Push For Enlargement – Available from
<http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=312>

region made. There is a likelihood that by 2009 the current “Western Balkans” will be divided into three new categories: Croatia, no longer “Balkan”, will prepare to become the EU’s next full member; Montenegro, Macedonia and probably Serbia will be involved in EU membership talks. And the EU protectorates, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, plus Albania will be left behind, stigmatized as societies that like to dream of Europe but lack the courage and determination to act on their rhetoric.

It is time for Albania and its leaders to wake up to this danger and to set themselves and the country an ambitious goal. Albania needs to find a way to express politically the strong social consensus concerning the EU. The Albanian political class needs to stop saying *to itself* that it wants to join the EU and take the most essential, basic, logical first step: to announce its intention to other Europeans and EU institutions.

2. The Benefits of EU Accession *or* Miracles happen

EU accession is not an end in itself. It is not a matter of foreign policy. It is not primarily about administrations and diplomats. The goal of EU accession is about a different vision of the country. Before looking at the challenges involved in submitting an EU membership application let us look at some of the concrete benefits that this would bring. So here is an ambitious vision of a new Albania one decade from now (2018): this should be the starting point of political debates.

We see an Albania where per capita income has risen sharply (from € 2,100 ⁶ today to € 5,000 in 2018); where foreign direct investments (FDI) have increased dramatically (from less than 300 million ⁷ to 2 billion a year), creating tens of thousands of new jobs; where unemployment has fallen to low figures (from currently 14 percent ⁸ to less than 8 percent); and where many more people of working age work (instead of now less than 50 percent ⁹ to more than 60 percent). We see an Albania where the number of foreign visitors and tourists will have doubled (from 1 million¹⁰ to 2 million) and where public and private investments will have transformed the physical infrastructure of the country, its ports, roads, waste dumps and power stations. In this Albania there would still be corruption, but not necessarily more than in some current EU member states, such as Italy, Poland or the Baltic states. People will still be dissatisfied with the performance of the government, but no more than in most EU members today.

⁶ Eurostat - Compact Guide (2007) *Candidate and Potential Candidate Countries – Overview of recent economic developments*. pg. 4.

⁷ Boga & Associates (2008) *Investment in Albania 3rd Edition*. pg. 27. Available from: http://www.bogalaw.com/pdf/Investment_in_Albania_2008.pdf

⁸ Instat (2007) *Albania in Figures*. pg.13. (exact figure 13.8 %)

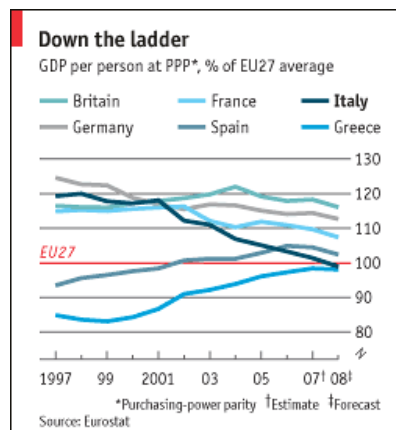
⁹ Ibid. (exact figure 48.7 %)

¹⁰ Instat (2007) *Albania in Figures*. pg.60. (exact figure 937,038)

Now, if anyone would present such a vision as part of a political program, one would be inclined to dismiss it as political fantasy, the rhetoric of election time. But miracles happen. Poor countries do catch up with rich countries. And some of the most impressive recent stories of catching up have taken place in Europe in the very recent past, linked to the process of EU enlargement.

The most famous example of a small country catching up spectacularly is, of course, Ireland which went from being one of the poorest to being one of the richest countries in Europe within one generation. But Ireland is far from being an exception. To see what a real process of Europeanisation, starting this year, could mean for Albania let us examine the changing economic geography of Europe after three decades of enlargements in Southern Europe: the European Mediterranean, the Eastern Balkans and Turkey.

First, let us look at Greece (which joined the EU in 1981) and Spain (which joined the EU in 1986). Both countries were poor when they became EU members. However, in 2006 Spain was able to overtake Italy – one of the EU founding members and part of the G8 of leading industrial nations – in terms of GDP per capita. In 2009 Greece is set to achieve the same (see chart below). These are remarkable cases of catching up.



Source: Eurostat¹¹

Francesco Grillo, at the London School of Economics, recently suggested that, if current trends remain unchanged, Romania might also overtake Italy in 2020! This was meant to shock Italians, but the shock would not work would there not be a kernel of truth. In fact, taking a closer look at Romania and its transformation since the late 1990s is extremely instructive. As one of the leading political scientists in Romania, Alina Mungiu Pippidi, noted recently:

¹¹ Available from: http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11067600

“The existence of a European option prevented Romania from staying as Albania or regressing to become a new Belarus... More than any constitutional or electoral law, European integration and the prospect of accession to the EU have shaped Romanian politics, and it is in this challenging environment that Europe achieved its largest success to-date. Romania’s transition may have seemed long and strenuous for Romanians, but from Ceausescu’s snipers and Iliescu’s vigilante miners to the signing of the Accession Treaty with the EU [it] has taken only fifteen years.”

Looking back, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi maintains that “what is exceptional and needs some explanation in Romania’s case is not her difficult separation with its communist past, but the final positive outcome: the signing of the Accession Treaty with the European Union in April 2005.” The EU accession process had a crucial role in the dramatic transformation of the last decade:

“Politics changed importantly after Romania applied for EU membership, and furthermore, after it was granted ‘candidate’ status in 1999. This meant that tutelage from Brussels had become acceptable even for the PDSR [the ex-communist Socialist Party] ... The prospect of accession to the EU opened the door for a new type of political change, a change pushed from below but taking advantage of external conditionality, necessary in a society where powerful people remained above the law. From 1996 on, democratization progressed slowly but irreversibly in nearly every field.”

The main effect of the prospect of EU membership has been its role as an anchor of the reform process. The drive to join the EU has been one of the most powerful incentives for undertaking major reforms in all candidate countries. But this was not a technical reform process only. The desire for and the prospect of EU membership have had the most profound and unique, though sometimes difficult to quantify, effect on every dimension of society in applicant countries, be it the working of the administration, the rebuilding of civil society, relations between the main political actors, or among the institutions of the state, or inter-ethnic relations.

The energy behind this change was a Romanian public which desperately wanted to join “Europe” and resented being left behind; and elites which saw their interests in this process:

“the PDSR/PSD [Iliescu’s party] needed the Romanian economy to become successfully integrated with the European one, and after securing their domestic domination, seeking European recognition was their next important objective. Romania’s former communists have been genuinely convinced of the EU and its advantages.”

Romania is not an isolated success story. Like Romania, Bulgaria has also moved dramatically beyond the problems it faced only one decade ago. In international business reviews Bulgaria is today presented as a “Balkan tiger”: in 2006 real GDP growth in Bulgaria was forecast to reach 6.1 percent. The state budget posted a record surplus. Unemployment

had fallen from 18 percent in 2001 to less than 9 percent in the third quarter of 2006, the lowest level since 1991. Investment rose from roughly 15 percent of GDP in 2000 to 25 percent. Capital goods became the fastest growing category in the recent import boom, laying the basis for continued high growth. Since 2001 average wages have begun to increase significantly.

There was also a spectacular increase in foreign direct investment (FDI). From 1992 to 1996 the annual average of FDI was less than € 200 million. In 1997, annual FDI was still less than € 1 billion. In 2000 it reached more than 1 billion. In 2003 annual FDI was more than € 2 billion. In 2007 it was more than € 5 billion. Most of this is linked to green-field investment (i.e. new companies being set up). By 2004 the value of accumulated FDI per capita had nearly caught up to the level of Poland.

This is all the more remarkable when one looks at where Bulgaria came from. The winter 1996/1997 had seen an economic meltdown, a dive of the national currency, and a drop in the average salary from \$120 in January 1996 to \$28 in December, “the lowest in the region”. The country was isolated: relations with the IMF were tense, and there was talk of a default on its international debt. In the country tables of “Institutional Investor” in 1995 Bulgaria was in the 93rd position, behind Bangladesh and Syria. It had the lowest level of FDI per capita of all Central European Countries. In 1997 Bulgarian GDP stood at 63 percent of its 1989 level. Seven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it looked like the Bulgarian transition was failing. No population in Central Europe was as negative on the direction of social change as the Bulgarians:

“As the result of unfulfilled expectations, society entered a period characterised by a widespread feeling of loss of orientation, fear of the future, the feeling that much was destroyed and not much – if anything – new attained.”

Finally, there is the case of Turkey. This is another spectacular illustration of the difference between being associated with the EU (which Turkey was since the early 1960s) and being on a credible accession track (which only happened after candidate status was given to Turkey in 1999). In recent years Turkey attracted as much FDI every year as it did in the two decades (!) from 1980 to 2000! Since 2002 the country has seen the highest growth in its modern history. Being a member of NATO, the Council of Europe or being associated with the EU for a long time did not do the trick. Steady reforms in a context of EU accession did.

What becomes obvious from this analysis is that the EU accession process produces major change. It brings increased prosperity, reduces credit risks, increases investment and reduces unemployment. It brings about social and economic revolutions. It is this silent revolution in the name of joining the European mainstream that Albania needs to embark on now. The vision of Albania in 2018 with which we started **is realistic**, as long as there is no further delay and Albanian leaders learn from other European experiences.

3. The Mythology of EU accession

There are a few myths concerning EU accession. The first is that there is ever a moment in which the EU will invite countries to submit an application for membership. In fact, if the political elite waits for this moment it may well never come. There was no such moment for Spain in the 1980s. Nor for Austria in the early 1990s. Nor for Croatia in 2002. Nor for Macedonia in 2004. All these countries first determined their interest and then ignored warnings that this was “not the right moment.” This was arguably the first test they needed to pass to be taken seriously as candidates.

The second myth is that an EU application should only happen after the SAA is in force and after Albania has fulfilled its requirements. This would be the introduction of a new standard for Albania that was not applied to Croatia, Macedonia or will not be applied to Serbia. In the case of Albania the interim agreement with the EU has entered into force in December 2006. The EU Troika complimented in March 2008 Albania’s progress related to its implementation¹². If Albania applies for membership in autumn 2008 there will be even more time to implement the interim agreement. By then even more countries will also have ratified the SAA (to date, 20 out of 25 Member States have done so).

But this is no obstacle. Croatia and Macedonia submitted an application before their SAA entered into force and subsequently received candidate status. Croatia signed the SAA in October 2001, applied for membership in **February 2003**, candidate status was confirmed in June 2004 and the SAA entered into force on the 1st of **February 2005**. Macedonia signed the SAA in April 2001, applied for membership in **March 2004**, the SAA entered into force in **April 2004**, and candidate status was granted by the European Council on the 16-th of December 2005.

In the case of Serbia, even before signing a SAA agreement, the Council of the EU has noted in January 2008 that “the EU offers Serbia the prospect of intensifying political co-operation with a view to accelerating its progress towards the EU, including candidate status.”¹³ The EU signed the SAA with Serbia on the 29th of April and in the press conference right after the signature Boris Tadic, the President of Serbia, stated in a

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 2845th and 2846th General Affairs and External Relations Council meetings, Brussels, 28 January 2008

news conference in Luxembourg that “We [Serbia] would like to become an official candidate by the end of the year”.¹⁴

The third myth is that submitting an application for membership is a difficult decision. It should not be, however, compared to the hard work for a country that follows an application. To put it differently: if a political elite doubts whether it should or should even apply for membership, it sends a powerful signal to others that it does not trust in

the country, its administration and in itself. If making an application is too hard a step to take so are certainly the real reforms which would need to follow.

The fourth myth is that giving candidate status to a country is a reward bestowed by the EU on a country for its good behavior, allowing politicians to bask in glory. To keep politicians working, it is best to withhold such a “reward” as long as possible. In fact, candidate status means more work, more conditionality, more work for any Albanian government and administration and stronger European influence. By asking for candidate status a country does not ask for a favour or reward: it wants to graduate to a different more challenging set of conditions. At every step of the membership application – from the formal expression of interest to the completion of the questionnaire the EU will send to the Albanian government – the EU will look more closely at Albanian deficiencies. Thus the cost of non-compliance *rises* for Albanian political actors, unless they want to be blamed for lack of progress.

4. Why the right moment is *now*

But why not wait? One could turn the question on its head: what possible reasons could there be to wait longer? To answer this question let us look at current relations between Albania and the EU, the state of the EU itself, the situation in the Balkans and Albania’s own internal dynamics.

Albania was the first of the countries of the region to start negotiations with the EU for signing a Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2003. The negotiations were successfully completed and the Agreement was signed in June 2006, completing Albania’s first major step toward its full EU membership. The Interim Agreement has entered into force in December 2006. It mostly covers SAA provisions related to the free movement of goods and services between Albania and the EU.

Until present, the SAA has been ratified from 20 out of 25 member states. During the ordinary Meeting of the Political Dialogue between Albania and the EU held in Brussels on 11 March 2008, the “EU Troika noted with pleasure Albania’s progress during this period pursuant to the Interim Agreement; it welcomed the achievements of Albania’s Government in its economic, political and legal reforms and extended EU full support for the

¹⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL2952262420080429>

continued progress in this track, while keeping the same pace of Albania's further advancement in its irreversible European course."¹⁵

As far as the EU is concerned, we can note that enlargement fatigue has recently returned to "normal" levels. Turkey is still negotiating for its accession, despite the coming to power of politicians who have expressed their skepticism such as Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. Croatia is getting ready to join. Some EU leaders are even pointing to new horizons (France

has referred to the European future of Moldova, while Sweden and Poland want a new policy towards Eastern Europe). There are preparations for new negotiations (with Macedonia). There is an anticipation of new candidates (Montenegro, Serbia). 2008 is also the right moment in terms of EU institutional dynamics in Brussels: there will be a new parliament and a new commission in 2009.

Then there is the momentum in the Balkans, the need for the EU to take decisions related to Montenegro and Serbia and the dynamic in Albania itself. Albania's recent invitation to join NATO with the agreement of most EU members shows that Albania is now ready to be treated as a "partner" rather than as a "subject" country.

Albania will hold parliamentary elections in summer/autumn 2009. Some argue that Albania should delay its application until after the elections. However, the elections should be seen as an opportunity, not as a risk. By submitting an application this autumn Albania would give value to a year which would otherwise be consumed by campaigns. A confirmation of a possible Albanian candidate status would in all likelihood not happen before Albania holds fully free and fair elections. This would be healthy for the Albanian democracy.

Finally, there is the question of the government's own credibility. The Albanian government has stated in its National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI), the principal policy framework of the country, that "the granting of candidate status for membership of the European Union will be made possible within a two-year period"¹⁶. In the Macedonian case, it took some 21 months (March 2004 to December 2005) from the time of its application till the granting of "candidate status" by the EU Council. The NSDI has started to be operational in March 2008. Therefore the Albanian Government must finalize the official candidature of Albania to become EU member in a couple of months if it intends to meet the deadlines it has set itself.

¹⁵ Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, 11 March 2008. Available from: <http://www.mfa.gov.al/english/be/lajm.asp?id=5018>.

¹⁶ Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, National Strategy for Development and Integration 2007-2013, March 2008. pg. 15.

5. How to apply

The procedure for the application for membership is clear. In the Treaty of Maastricht (Article 49), it is stated that any European country that respects the principles of the European Union may apply to join. All Western Balkan countries were promised full EU membership in the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. So what does a country which clearly qualifies on formal criteria and believes it is ready need to do?

The first step is to establish a strong domestic consensus expressed in a joint resolution in parliament, following the example of Croatia, Macedonia and Montenegro. The next step is to make a convincing case to the outside world: to put Albania in the news; to reach out to possible skeptics in Brussels and in EU capitals. The third step is to get to work and put

the administrative machinery in place: first for the questionnaire, which the Commission will send in response to the application and then already for the process of accession talks to follow.

The procedure for applying to join the European Union starts with an *Official Request of Accession* sent by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the interested country to the European Council. The European Council, after receiving the official application, requests from the European Commission to prepare an opinion on the application of the respective country.

In the case of Croatia the official application was submitted on 21 February 2003 and the Council of Ministers decided on 14 April 2003 “to implement the procedure laid down in the EU treaty”. In the case of Macedonia, the official membership application was presented on 22 March 2004. The EU Council requested the Commission to prepare an opinion on the application on 17 May 2004.

The Commission then prepares its opinion on the application. This opinion is in large part based on an extensive questionnaire which it sends to the applicant country. Here too there are regional precedents. Five months after the Council’s request to the Commission for an opinion, the President of the then European Commission, Romano Prodi, went to Skopje in October 2004 and transmitted the questionnaire.

The next phase involves most work: the applicant state needs to complete the questionnaire and return it to the commission. It took the Macedonian institutions less than four months to prepare and submit some 14,000 pages of answers.

Next the European Commission reviews the answers. In the case of Croatia the Commission’s Opinion was published in April 2004, recommending the granting of candidate status. In the case of Macedonia the Opinion came on 9 November 2005. It also recommended that the Republic of Macedonia be granted candidate status.

Finally, it is the European Council and the 27 member states represented there who need to decide by unanimity whether to grant candidate status to the applicant country, after receiving the assent of the European Parliament. In the case of Macedonia *the European Council did so on 17 December 2005.*

6. The cost of delay

The cost of delay is real. By not applying this year Albania loses a regional momentum. On the Western Balkans level, there is a regional impetus towards the EU. Montenegro and Serbia have clearly expressed their ambitions to officially apply for EU membership before the end of the year, while Croatia and Macedonia have already embarked on that train.

Albania's application would be an important step also for the stability of the wider region. EU policy in the region has reached a dangerous turning-point. There was no consensus in the EU about Kosova's status. There was no consensus in the EU about Macedonia's invitation to join NATO. The progress of Albania in the EU integration process would signal to other countries – including Kosovo - that the EU means business in the region and is ready to reward real progress.

The most important impact, however, would be on Albania itself. Real progress towards the EU would signal to Albania's citizens that the dreadful transition will not last forever. Nor is the isolation of the country set to last. A truly European Albania is possible. All it takes is courage and the willingness to work hard.

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